BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

"It is out of the past that the future is moulded, it is the past that becomes the future. Therefore the more the Hindus study their glorious past, the more glorious will be their future...."

Swami Vivekananda

HINDU CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS



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Introduction

We Indians belong to the land that gave the world the treasures contained in the Vedas and the evergreen philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

India's sculptures and paintings are comparable to the best in Greek and Roman Art. Its architectural heritage was acknowledged by Lord Curzon to be "the Greatest Galaxy of Monuments in the World." In fact it was here that flourished the great Indus Valley Civilization, a marvel in social set-up and communal living-millennia before the birth of Christ.

My venturesome ancestors migrated to the Canary Islands to try their fortune at the turn of the century. My parents took me there while I was an infant. It was in 1955 that I was enrolled in to a Spanish Catholic School run by Dominican Nuns. As luck would have it. I was the only Hindu girl in a class of over 40 Spanish students.

Born and brought up in a predominantly western atmosphere. I grew up totally westernised in my thoughts and outlook. Denied access to our rich cultural heritage. I could not meet my classmates in discussion when they wondered aloud how Hindus could be so pagan as to worship cows, monkeys and elephants. It was, perhaps, this humiliation, of which I was a victim, which sowed the seed in my mind to know and delve deep into the origin of our customs and beliefs, which, at first sight, may appear superstitious to outsiders.

On my return to India to complete my studies, I was shocked that the majority of the people here, with whom I came in contact, had little or no knowledge of the significance of the rituals and customs that had come down to them from ancient times; I found them practicing them mechanically because it is a tradition, without going into the "Why and wherefore". My searching enquiries elicited no satisfactory explanations. It was then that I decided to seek the answers for myself by attending lectures and discourses by learned people. I felt mentally relieved when I learned that every belief and ritual, in Hinduism had a scientific and logical explanation and had been prescribed with the good of the individual in mind.

These beliefs and rituals date back to the ancient times. Due to intellectual inertia, the reasoning faculties of the large mass of the people are not always developed. The wise ones therefore found it necessary to give these beliefs and rituals a religious base, so that the masses would follow them in their daily life and derive benefit though they may not be aware why these have been enjoined upon them.

Unscrupulous people everywhere have the evil genius to exploit the credulous for their selfish ends. As time passed, It was easy for much men to inject an element of fear in the credulous that non-performance of the age old customs and rituals is a heinous sin and personal disaster would be the outcome if they were not followed to the letter. They also contrived to bring about unsavory accretions to the customs and rituals for their own advantage. As has happened everywhere else, the credulous and unthinking among the people took to these customs and practices without questioning. Thus was born superstition, the source of which is fear.

My aim in writing this book is to make the reader approach the subject with a constructive and open mind and try to understand for himself the scientific origin of our customs and beliefs, thereby getting rid of himself and those around him, from the superstitious accretions, which have found a place in our rituals and practices.

I shall feel amply rewarded for my labours if this humble attempt on my part helps In dispersing the darkness which has clouded our customs and practices and restoring them to their pristine purity in the mind of the reader.

Shakun Narain
Bombay
15th June 1982

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Chapter 1

Sacred Days and Festivals
THEIR OBSERVANCES AND BENEFICIAL EFFECTS

Like every major world religion. Hinduism has proclaimed certain days of the week as sacred. The Jews observe the Sabbath. Muslims observe Friday as their day of special prayer and the Hindus follow the lunar calendar, which is based on the waxing and waning of the moon.

The month is divided into two; the fortnight following the full moon day is called krishnapaksha and the fortnight succeeding the new moon day shuklapaksha. The full moon day is termed *Purnima* and the new moon day is termed Amavasi.

Both these days are sacred to the Hindus and they are enjoined by the scriptures to observe fast, or at any rate take only light food in the night.

Our scriptures proclaim that the Cosmos is reflected in man. It is a scientific fact that man is essentially made of the same elements as the surface of the earth and in the same proportion. Since man is composed of 80% liquid and 20% solid as the surface of the earth, the gravitational pull of the moon on human beings is at its highest on full moon day, just as the gravitational pull of the moon is at its highest on the ocean-high tide and low tide in scientific terms. This gravitational pull of the moon on human beings affects the composition of the body elements, particularly the Water content. This leads to emotional imbalances in human beings, making them tense, irritable and violent. Hence the term lunatic which is derived from the word luna' meaning moon in Latin.

Our ancients obviously recognised the effect of the moon on human behavior as it waxed and waned. It Is well-known that the mentally unstable are susceptible to violence during the full moon and new moon days - to wit: New York's 'Son of Sam" committed murder on eight nights, five of them during the new or full moon days.

The wise men that they were, our ancients sought a way to combat the evil effects on human behaviour during the full moon and new moon days. They found that light food on these days would lower the acidic content in our system, which helps human beings to retain their mental balance. By fasting or taking light food the whole system is given a rest. By praying man would not allow his emotions to run wild. When the system is at rest psychologically also there is rest in man. He feels comfortable physically and psychologically and will not be prone to irritation and outburst of temper. Hindus also observe fasting on *Ekadashi,* the eleventh day of the fortnight and also on Saturdays. This is intended to give a rest to the digestive system In the human body, so that the stomach muscles can easily throw out the toxic contents of the food without strain.

Fasting is a sort of-Self discipline. When we keep fasts for a purpose, we act on the faith that our prayers will be answered. Faith is positive thinking: so the chances are that what you wish for will come to pass.

For the Hindu, each day of the week is governed by a planet. Sunday by the sun: Monday by the moon: Tuesday by mars: Wednesday by Mercury: Thursday by Jupiter: Friday by Venus: Saturday by Saturn. This shows that the ancients were fully aware about the planets, with the sun in the centre.

Our ancients prescribed worship of these planets as they were aware of their gravitational influences on the subconscious of man. By worshipping them, man is attuned to their influences, thereby helping him to get a control over his mental activity.

Since the general run of men are normally not adequately mentally developed to grasp the inner significance of the scientific and hygienic reasons of these observances, our ancients

prescribed them as part of their religious duties. Thus, even though the masses may not be aware of the “why” of them, still they derive benefits from the observances. For the same reason, our ancients abjured eating of flesh and recommended vegetarian diet. Eating Vegetarian food was recommended for physiological reasons as well as moral ones.

The moral viewpoint of the vegetarians’ belief is based on the theories of *Ahimsa* and *Karma.* Ahimsa believes In non-aggression and non-violence on any living creature and the law of *karma* proclaims that we are the builders of our own destiny and that from good deeds joy shall come and from evil deeds, suffering.

Since meat-eating would necessitate the slaughter of animals which is a violation of the *ahimsa* theory, vegetarians do not indulge in non-vegetarian food as they do not want to increase their *karmic* debts by partaking of flesh.

The physiological reason is that meat increases the acidic content in our blood, which results in the lowering of the amount of carbon dioxide.

Eating vegetables has the opposite effect: the acidity is reduced and carbon dioxide pressure in the lungs is increased, thereby reducing the amount of oxygen going to the brain.

The yogis claim that a vegetarian diet is conducive to meditation, may be because the five senses (sight, hearing, sound, smell & touch) are less active due to less oxygen reaching the brain and the stilling of the mind is a very important prerequisite for a person who wants to maintain equanimity of mind.

Today, new biological discoveries tend to show that flesh eating is not essential for good health and some biologists are even of the opinion that flesh eaters are more susceptible to illness than vegetarians.

The ancient Hindus were however not fanatic about whether to eat meat or abstain from it but looked more Into the practical aspect.

A Certain sect of Hindus. the Sindhis, are told to eat fish only on the day of the new moon.

As mentioned earlier, the moon has an effect on the tides of the ocean, hence on the fishing. There are certain kinds of fish that tend to come to the surface during that time. The catch of the fish is easier. Fish, being a perishable commodity, is better consumed as soon as possible. So if you are not a vegetarian, would it not make more sense if you eat fish on new moon day when fish would probably be cheaper and fresher? Of course, I am talking of the time when this custom started when cold storage, as we know it, did not exist.

Certain sections of modern English-speaking Hindus believe that one should not eat fish during the months that have no ‘R’ in it i.e. May. June. July. August. Note that the months coincide with rainy months in India during which fishing is a problem.

As a matter of fact many Hindus observe the “Chaumasa”. During these months, when they are vegetarians and have their fast and prayers.

Because of the rainy season, vegetables are plentiful and fresh. Besides most of our important Indian festivals fall during these months namely Ramzan, Nagapanchami, Dussera, Nariel purnima, Janmastami, etc.

Festival Days:

The number of festival days in the Hindu calendar is legion. But each festival serves a purpose.

Mythology & Folk-lore are the means by which our ancient tried to impart spirituality to the masses.

Some of the most Important festival days of Hindus are: Deepavali, Ramanavami, Shivarathri, Krlshnajanmastami and Vinayakachaturthi. Just as national days are observed to remind the people of the great men who helped free the country from foreign yoke and who underwent untold hardships and even made the supreme sacrifice to serve as inspiration to later generations so also the festival days are observed so that we may be reminded of the exemplary lives of the "Avatars" (Godlike men) and their exploits.

Ramanavami is a day on which Sri Ramachandra was born. Endowed as he was with all the thirty-two lakshanas (the thirty two virtues which characterise the perfect man), even today after many millennia he serves as an inspiration to countless number of Hindus. Valmiki's Rama was an ideal son, ideal husband, ideal brother and ideal king. Walter Whitman sang: "The lives of great men all remind us how to make our lives sublime".

When we worship Sri Rama on Ramanavami day we believe that we shall be able to fulfill our duties to the members of our family and society as well as he was able to.

Deepavali is the festival of lights. The word "Deepavali" is a Sanskrit compound made up of two simple words. "Deepa" means light and "Avali" means a row. Hence the word means a row of lights. The festival is associated with many legends and beliefs. One is to commemorate the kllling of Narakasura, a notorious demon, by lord Krishna.

Narakasura, however, because of his previous store of virtue, had been granted a boon at the moment of his death. He asked that his death might ever be commemorated as a day of feasting.

Hence Deepavali is known as "Naraka Chaturdasi".

The fireworks that are burst during Deepavali symbolise the use of fiery weapons used during the war that Krishna waged against the demon, It is day of rejoicing as the people were saved from atrocities of the demon.

Mostly among the North Indians it is believed that Deepavali is the day on which Sri Rama returned from his 14 years of exile in the forest, after having got rid of various demons who made life hell for the sages and common people.

It symbolises the victory of good over evil since it symbolises the triumphant return of Rama to his kingdom. It is celebrated with lamps and lights to welcome him back to his throne.

On Deepavali day the member of the mercantile community open and worship new account books and ledgers. This is because during Deepavali the Sun enters its second course and passes Libra, which is represented by the balance or scale.

During Deepavali, spring cleaning is done as it is believed that the Goddess of wealth Lakshmi would enter a clean, bright and cheerful house.

Whether the Goddess Lakshmi come to the house or not, the fact remains that a lot of lost items are found during the cleaning up of nooks and corners and lot of dirt is removed from the house, the breeding ground of infectious germs.

Krishna Janmashtami is celebrated to commemorate the birth of Sri Krishna. Sri Krishna is a deity with whom one feels easier to identify with, He is so endearingly human and lovable, and yet is deep enough to expound the Immortal *Bhagvad Gtta* - a philosophy which is true to life In every respect, ever fresh every time one reads it and always a guide In every circumstance.

Holi is the festival of colour: it heralds the advent of spring and symbolises the spirit, young at heart. During Holi, people let themselves go in sheer abandon and sprinkle 'gulal' (coloured powder) on one another.

In a society where decorum is so much observed and rules are strictly laid down as to how one ought to behave with elders and relatives, the above festival is essential as it affords an opportunity to give free play to one's pent-up emotions.

Trespass of decorum is excused on that day and enemies become friends once more.

Holi commemorates the death of Holika, a demoness, again denoting the victory of benign forces over evil ones.

The burning of dead wood and rubbish, while reminding us of the legendary fact that Holika was consumed by flames, has the practical purpose of outdoor spring cleaning.

The smearing of colour on one another has the symbolic meaning that we ought to start with a new resolution. We ought to put a new dye on our personality. We ought to change intolerance and hostility into feelings of love, friendship and brotherhood.

Sivaratri is celebrated to commemorate the marriage of Lord Shiva with Parvati. The whole night is spent in prayers & singing devotional songs. One should remember that it is not enough to be awake physically during the night but also endeavour to awaken from the sleep of ignorance in which we seem to be seeped so deeply.

Vinayakachaturthi is the festival of Ganesh. The idol of Ganapati who is considered the "Remover of obstacles" is brought home and deeply revered by family and friends. After days of devotional songs and prayers, it is immersed in to the water. This festival induces camaraderie and brings together the community into a mood of spiritual festivity and cheer.

India being a vast, colourful country has innumerable other festivals. Some celebrate the victory of good over evil: others are based upon instances in the life of several deities in the Hindu pantheon: still others are connected with spring, the season of love plentiful ness in nature. But all promote togetherness in the hearts of people and induce them to put aside their petty differences for a while and join together in brotherhood and love.

Chapter 2

HINDU CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS
- WHAT THEY DENOTE - Part One

Hinduism is as old as the hills. The word "Hinduism" Is a misnomer. The *Hindu Dharma* was known as *Sanatana Dharma,* the eternal law. This springs from the ingrained faith of the Hindus that all creation- animate and inanimate-is one family. The ancient sages and seers repeatedly impressed upon us the truth that by harming another one is injuring oneself.

As we all know, in day-to-day life, we receive back what we do to others in the same coin. Hatred begets hatred, jealousy begets jealousy, and love begets love. It is as simple as action and reaction. Therefore, if we wish to be loved by others it is incumbent upon us to send forth thoughts of love to others by whom we wish to be loved in turn. That is why Jesus Christ said: "Love thy neighbour as thyself."

Belonging to a race which firmly believes that creation is one family. Hindus were basically vegetarian. However they were not fanatic and in determining what food may be taken, ancient Hindus took into account various factors concerning the commodity men used for consumption. First in order are vegetables: then fish, then the other animals. They prohibited slaughtering of cows for consumption. The reason is not far to seek. The cows are more useful to us alive than dead. It provides milk for our babies and grown- ups alike: it ploughs our fields for cultivating our food: its urine has medicinal properties and the dung is used as manure for our crop as well as to light village fires. The smoke that emanates from it kills mosquitoes and other disease-carrying germs. Small wonder then that the cow is worshipped as the mother by the Hindus.

The Tulasi plant is tended with love and reverence by the Hindus. The Tulasi leaves have medicinal properties for destroying malaria germs, stopping vomiting, destroying worms and are good for Asthma. Many are the unique powers of the Tulasi leaves that I shall be dealing with it in a separate chapter by itself.

In the morning we Hindu children were made to place a glass of water, with Tulasi leaves in our prayer room as *prasad* (offering to the deity) which we would consume after finishing our prayers. We were supposed to be fasting until then. Today, the doctors tell us that it is good to have a glass of water first thing in the morning. A Tulasi leaf or two added to it, leaves no doubt in my mind that it would be most beneficial for our health.

The ladies were asked to go round the Tulasi. As they would do the above exercise they would breathe in more heavily thereby inhaling the air full of Tulasi fragrance, which, I am told, would cleanse the lady’s system making it easier for her to conceive a child. We were made to worship the Tulasi plant as it is delicate and unless it is tended with care it does not last long. Like the Tulasi, haldi (turmeric) also has medicinal properties so it is a part of ritual to give a packet of it as a gift to a daughter when she is blessed with a child.

When a child gets measles, chicken pox, small pox, Hindus are told not to panic as Durga Mata, (mother of Creation) has manifested within the patient. We are asked not to give medicines but to feel positive and pray.

Today we know that measles is caused by virus. There Is no known medicine to combat it. It takes its own course. All we should do is to have a prayerful, positive attitude and keep the patient as comfortable as possible. However, we Hindus are allowed to give medicines, after the 5th or 7th day when the temperature subsides and that is when it is necessary to administer cough syrups and other antibiotics to prevent complications.

In the Hindu community a girl, after she reaches puberty. Is barred from entering the prayer room or performing any religious prayers during her menstruation. The only reason mentioned in our scriptures is that she is *(ashudha)* unclean during that period.

Let us go back to where this custom started from. During those days ladies would have their bath either in the river, pond or near the well. During the time when the girl would be menstruating, it would be awkward to bathe together with the rest of the ladies as you would probably 'pollute' the water.

Since the ladies did not bathe and there were no bathroom facilities for the rest of the day during the menstruating period, they would naturally be termed 'unclean' during that time. Hence, their being barred from the clean' places in the house, namely the prayer room or the kitchen.

This is, as far as the physical aspect of being *(ashudha)* unclean, goes.

However, when the scriptures spoke of 'ashudha' they may have not only meant the physical aspect but the mental aspect as well.

Science talks of the menstrual syndrome, i.e., a woman is more irritable during those days because of a hormonal imbalance. Psychics claim that there is a different aura around a menstruating woman, maybe again a chemical reaction. Segregating to pray requires a positive attitude and people tend to respond to the negative vibrations of a person standing with you; maybe that was the reason why a woman was barred from public places of prayer during these days.

Whatever the reason, the ladies who used to work so hard during the month would get a well-earned rest during that period of time.

Another class of people that are kept excluded from the rest of the so-called high class Hindu society are the Sudras or as they are more commonly called the untouchables.

The Vedic interpretation of caste classification was based on the distribution of social labour and had nothing to do with the superiority or inferiority of the individual.

Hence a man of intellectual wisdom was a Brahmin; a man of developed physique a Kshatriya (Protector), a man engaged in mercantile pursuits a Vaishya and a man who was a labourer and monetarily backward, a Sudra.

The above classifications are similar to the ones we could give out today depending upon a person's profession i.e. a scholar, a soldier, a businessman and a labourer.

Just like today it is in the man's hand to choose the profession of his heart's desire, pursue it and earn the title, so was it in the Vedic period.

Nowhere in the Vedas is propagated hatred and untouchablity of the Sudras that plagues our society today, and true highness was more dependent on the intellectual values and humane conduct of the individual rather than on the convention which regards caste of birth as the basic for class determination.

As young Hindus, our parents and grandparents made us go through the ritual of bathing the idols, putting a *tikka* (mark on forehead) and garlanding them. But that was probably the nursery class to spiritual advancement. It was to instil the habit of spending a little time in the prayer room, and to keep us occupied while we chanted our mantra or our personal prayer.

We are normally made to cover our head during our prayers as a symbolism to denote that we will totally surrender to the Lord by symbolically covering our seat of knowledge, namely the brain.

We are made to perform Aarti (a small flame is burnt on a wick, which we rotate round the deity).

The Aarti reminds us of the greatness of the Lord, because the flame that rotates it is symbolic of the cosmos (sun, moon, stars) revolving round Him, thereby making obeisance to Him.

The Aarti is performed during the morning and the evening; and that makes our prayers a must, besides the flame being conducive to the elimination of mosquitoes and Hindu philosophy teaches us that we ought to burn our desires, because they are the root cause of all our problems.

By burning the flame at night we are reminded of the above philosophy and we hope that our desires are burnt away along with the flame as we go through the rhythmic movement of the Aarti.

We associate the fragrance of the Incense stick with prayer, so when we light it, It becomes easier for us to become attuned to our communication with the Lord. The habit of taking a lit incense stick round the deity and to different religious pictures round the home helps in bringing the fragrance all through the house.

N. G. Bhave believes that all that exists is just different levels of energy. He states that "the ancients found such large and strong accumulation of life energy in vagabonds of space that they raised them to the level of minor deities which could influence life according to certain laws". He refutes the belief that Idol' worship is just a stupid waste of time as some of these idols are actually invested with such high energy level that even persons who have attained a very high degree of spiritual evolution become ecstatic in their presence, and the Indian version of idolating is good enough for all but the most evolved.

Even blind mental attachment to some existence at a higher level makes the mind move automatically towards such existence whenever doubt or peril is felt. This is actually a method prescribed by most religions for spiritual evolution of their followers.

When we become initiated by a Guru (Teacher), we are given a mantra (a certain word or sentence connected with Divinity) by him which we are made to repeat continuously. This makes the subconscious aware of the power of the object of devotion and so it starts to slowly move towards it.

The enlightened Hindus tell us that to achieve ultimate salvation we have to go beyond the mind, i.e., the mind has to be stilled from the five senses of sight, smell, sound, taste and touch that keep the mind in constant turmoil.

The devotional songs that we sing, the continuous repetition of a mantra and the swaying movement of Hindu prayer have rhythmic techniques and these tend to make the mind cling to the mantra thereby making the mind still.

According to the Katha Upanishad, "When the five senses and the mind are still, and reason itself rests in silence, then begins the path supreme."

The most powerful mantra amongst us Hindus is the "OM".

According to Hindu philosophy the vibrating sound of the OM encompasses the universe and we Hindus believe that by chanting it continuously with a certain technique we can be put in tune with the Cosmos.

According to the mystics, there is a difference between meditation and contemplation.

Meditation is the means or the path to reach the end. During meditation we still strive to feel the Truth, that is Universal Love.

During contemplation the soul has already achieved this end, being made one with the Truth and Love and is content to be in that state without any need for further striving.

HINDU CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS

- WHAT THEY DENOTE - Part Two

We Hindus have so many Gods to choose from and that to a lot of people is confusing.

I, however, believe that each God appeals to a certain characteristic in a person. Hence If your personality is inclined towards Duty as the main requisite for spiritual advancement your deity would probably be Sri Rama or if you are playful yet intellectual and loving who but Lord Krishna? To a warrior Durga Mata would appeal and to an ascetic, Lord Siva.

Each day of the week is consecrated to a certain God or Deity. Monday is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Tuesday to Ganapathy, Thursday to Goddess Laxmi, Friday to Santoshi Mata and Lalsai, Saturday to Hanuman.

Different families observe different days to fast and say their prayers depending upon their personal deity.

During medieval times even the Northern Europeans had consecrated each day of the week to a certain God.

Sunday as the name itself states was dedicated to the Sun.

Northern Europeans' name for the moon was 'Mona' hence Monday. Tuesday was dedicated to the God of war Tiw, Wednesday to the God Woden. Hence Wednesday is spelt with 'D' silent. Thursday for the God 'Thor' who the northern Europeans believed was responsible for lightning and thunder. Friday was dedicated to the Gentle Goddess "Frigg' who had a control over nature, love and marriage. Saturday was the day of Saturn, which the Romans believed was the god of farming.

Not so long ago, amongst the Hindus it was part of the early morning spiritual to give water to the Sun. The ladies would raise their cupped hands full of water and quench the sun's thirst, so to speak. Needless to say the earth's gravitational pull would prove stronger and the earth would get the water instead. However, in the process the ladies eyes benefited. Looking at the sun's early morning rays through the film of water which would fall from their cupped hands, their eyes would become stronger and brighter.

Our elders repeatedly tell us not to cut our nails at night. During the old days there used to be no electricity. If you cut your nails you might just hurt yourself.

We were also told not to sweep at night as otherwise Laxmi (Goddess of wealth) would leave! How literally true that is Again because of no electricity, chances are that you might just sweep off something of tremendous value that may have been dropped during the day, and would you not call that Laxmi leaving?

There are two beliefs to what happens when you jingle keys. One is that thieves will come. True, since you are tempting them. Another is that you will probably have a fight-again true-if you don't believe it, try jingling keys and making a racket while somebody in your family is trying to rest!

Superstition finds a place not only within Indian culture, but also within the western world.

Amongst the western superstitions the most common is the no. 13. In its original form it was considered unlucky to seat 13 at a table because of its association with the last supper when Christ and his apostles were present including Judas Iscariot, Jesus' betrayer.

13 at a table had proved unlucky earlier than Christianity. In Norse mythology, 13 Gods were at the table when the spirit of strife appeared, fought and killed Baldur who was a favourite amongst Gods.

Touching wood for luck originates from the early belief that every tree was inhabited by a certain God. They would touch the tree for luck or protection. Now, since there are no trees in easy reach the people touch wood and some even touch their head, considering in good humour, that their brain is a block of wood!

It has been considered unlucky to walk under ladders for fear that a tool or a pot of paint may fall upon your head. Some Christians considered it a blasphemy, as they believed that the person was breaking the triangle (Christian symbol of Trinity).

Yet others were reminded of the gallows, when the person convicted would drop from the ladder to the ropes and to their death.

Spilling salt has always been considered unlucky because it was used for preserving meat during winter.

We have from times immemorial been interested in trying to tap the unknown and we have tried to dolt through palmistry, Astrology etc.

Each person has an exclusive pattern in his hands consisting of loops and arches and according to palmists it is scientifically explainable.

Nerves terminate in the dermis layer of the skin, so whenever our hand touches fire, an automatic nerve activity is produced. Warning is then sent to the brain and the brain sends back a split instant order to remove the hand from danger.

Similarly in the hand there are millions of nerve endings. Each nerve ending corresponding nerve fibre ends in some part of the brain.

In the case of shock or excessive joy a disturbance is caused in the cerebral cells. The nerve fibres in that particular portion of the brain react and so do the corresponding nerve endings in the hand by contracting or expanding and causing a minute indentation caused by the violent emotion.

Thus lines are formed. The emotional impulses are shown in the formation of the heart line and the logical abilities in those of the head line.

The health of the subject can also be determined by a look at the hand.

The distribution of the ridges is determined by the arrangement of nerve endings and sweat glands. Certain toxins will cause abnormal opening of the sweat glands and so may cause alterations in the actual formation of the ridges.

Chemical deficiency is the fundamental cause of most diseases and these produce various malformations of nail growth.

Besides, doctors now believe that there is a very close connection between most skin diseases (like acne, dermatitis, warts) and mental states.

Astrology is based on the presumption that celestial bodies have an effect on life and events here on earth.

I have mentioned earlier that the moon has an effect on the fluid in our bodies there by having an effect on our emotions.

Similarly we also tend to respond to changes the sun produces in the earth's magnetic field.

Certain critics are forced to admit that the position of certain planets in our solar system at the time of birth has something to do with the profession of the child follows in future.

It is possible that at the moment of our birth the position of different planets does have an impact on us, forming our character, mode of behavior and thereby our destiny.

The position of the planets, maybe symbolic of some much larger cosmic pattern of energy in the cosmos, of which the planets and the earth are just parts.

There are some people who are able to tell a person's character just by looking at his face or physical structure. This is called physiognomy.

We all know that the physical attributes of a man are related to the climate in which he lives. People who live near the equator are dark skinned so that their pigment protects the deeper layers of their skin from the scorching sun. Whereas people living in colder climates have a fairer skin so that they may take full advantage of the sun to form vitamin D in their skins.

The Eskimos are short and fat to conserve heat since they live in the colder regions of the earth whereas the Africans are tall and thin as this gives them more body area to lose heat easier.

It is however also reasonable to deduce that just like the physique of a man is related to the environment in which he lives so certain features are formed denoting his characteristics. Emotions do play a part in the formation of the features of a person.

Generalisations have been made in which it is claimed that a dimple in the chin indicates a friendly and warm disposition, thick eyebrows indicate a person who can be trusted, etc..

The above is debatable: however the beauticians tell us that to keep our skin young and away from wrinkles we ought to massage our face with an upward motion.

A cheerful disposition and an optimistic attitude does that to your face naturally. Sulking and being resentful has the opposite effect as the chin muscles sag and frowning brings wrinkles near the forehead.

Indians have always been inclined towards people with psychic powers like clairvoyance. Intuition, telepathy etc., and devout Hindus tend to worship such characters as divine human beings with God-given gifts.

The scientists are doing research into the reasons why and the manners by which these feats are accomplished but they have not been able to reach any conclusive deduction; however they agree that the above qualities stem from the subconscious mind and it is proven that we use only a minute part of the enormous brain of unlimited capacity that we possess.

As a matter of fact, according to Lyall Watson 'We are like a small family of squatters who have taken over a vast place but find no need to move beyond the comfortable, serviced apartment in one corner of the basement."

Coming back to the psychic powers, though these may be gifts, achieved due to spiritual advancement and the practice of yoga, more often than not, they are just techniques which have been practiced diligently and acquired, and may have nothing to do with spiritual advancement.

As a matter of fact, though these people with miraculous powers may have learned something of amazing scientific and psychological interest they may have even regressed in the path of love, if ego has come in with the performance of these extraordinary feats.

These people forget the greatest miracle that life itself is, and tend to make spiritual things material; while a truly spiritual man always looks at material things as spiritual.

Coleridge states that in everything spiritual there is an element of beauty which is truth, and which we find in faith but which is lacking in fanaticism and superstition.

Besides the beliefs that have been mentioned already, there seem to be other superstitions that seemingly make no sense. Those customs, I believe, do not stem from the Vedic period but have been relatively recent additions with no scientific foundation whatsoever.

Chapter 3

RITUALS, PRACTICES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE
Part One

According to our scriptures our lives were supposed to have been divided into four ashramas (Classifications) - the Brahmacharya, the Grahastha, the vanaprastha and the Sanyasa.

The Brahmacharya was the early period of life when man was supposed to devote his time to education.

The Grahastha was when he would make a home; i.e. get married, have children, support himself and the family and follow whatever profession was best suited to him.

The vanaprastha was the age of retirement. During that time he was to leave the management of the family business to his sons and the running of the house to his daughter-in-law.

During this time all their responsibilities would be over and they were to practice detachment and prepare for the sanyasa ashram.

During the Sanyasa ashram, the elders would finally leave their homes to practice meditation in the woods and prepare for their union with the Almighty.

In olden days they led a full life but were always preparing for the next stage with full awareness; and when it was time to leave either their attachment or the home they were fully prepared, not only physically, but mentally and spiritually as well.

In most of our ceremonies-Wedding, Janeu ceremony etc., the *Havan Kund* (the sacrificial fire) is lit. The fire is an element, we believe, symbolising God, or the power of the universe.

To light the *Havan Kund* or sacrificial fire, two dry pieces of wood are brought into friction. The two pieces of wood symbolise the body and the soul (the true spirit In man) and the lighting of the fire symbolises that the physical body should start a quest for spiritual life. Just like that very fire devours the wood, so when you are spiritually enlightened you would be beyond the identification of yourself with the body.

Aahuti is the offering of 9 types of grain. ghee etc. that you put into the fire, amidst the chanting of special mantras which according to the Vedas have got special vibrations to create a certain atmosphere or to grant your particular wish. The aahuti used to be formerly brought by the neighbours and friends: it was mixed and offered to the fire by everyone present. This induced camaraderie and sense of equality between high and low and rich and poor. All present would chant “Swaha” In unison after the particular mantra has been recited by the priest. Swaha means “Arpan” which means in English “we offer”

Putting aahuti Into the “fire kund” is symbolic of putting our abilities into a field of activity in a spirit of Yagna, i.e. in a spirit of dedication. For instance, if you would like to become a doctor, you would have to go through your studies, and put in your utmost effort. Then you would leave the fruits to the Almighty. If you have done the above in the right spirit God would most probably bless you by making your efforts a success.

Graha Pujan or Planet worship is also common to most of our ceremonies. I have already explained earlier that we believe that the radiation from the different planets has an effect on our emotions & character and therefore our destiny.

Just before a ceremony, Graha Pujan symbolises an actual invitation to the different planets and different Gods to grace the occasion.

The different planets are symbolised in a nut form placed in a certain order.

Our prayers to the Gods residing in different planets is similar to the mode of behavior we mete out to our honoured guests.

We bathe the Gods, apply tika (Vermilion powder) garland them, offer them prasad (an offering in the form of food) and allot them their place for the duration of the ceremonies.

This is done as we are aware of the gravitational influence of the planets on the subconscious of man. By worshipping them man is attuned to their influences, thereby helping him to get a control over his mental activity and over the auspicious occasion that is about to commence.

Just before leaving for their formal education the Hindu boys would go through the Janeu or Upanayana ceremony, which is popularly known as the Sacred Thread Ceremony.

Upanayana or Janeu: Ceremonies performed in connection with the arrival of adolescence are universally preva1ent in all religions. The Parsis, the Christians. tie Mohammedans etc. all have rites specially meant for this purpose. Their object is to prepare the young man to shoulder the burden of the elders. The most striking point about the Upanayana is that by virtue of its performance the initiated is ranked as a Dvija or twice-born. This transformation of man's personality by means of religious ceremonies and the initiation into the Gayatri mantra compares well with the Christian rite of baptism which is regarded as a sacrament and carries with it a spiritual effect to reform the life of man. If we look beneath the surface of the ceremony, we cannot but recognise in it the expression of a deep human conviction that man, due to his contact with the world, loses his native purity and that he must be born again to enter the spiritual kingdom again. This ceremony should be performed before puberty.

The meaning of the term Upanayana The conception of Upanayana has undergone many changes in course of time. In the Artharva Veda it meant the initiation of the child by a teacher into sacred lore. Later on when the mystic significance of the Upanayana increased the idea of the second birth through the Gayatri mantra overshadowed the original idea of initiation for education. Manu says: "In the Vedic birth of the student, symbolised by wearing girdle made of Manja grass, Savitri (the goddess of learning) is, the mother and the guru the father." It is the rite through which a child is initiated into the vows of the guru, the Vedas, the restraints, observances and the vicinity of God. Later the ceremony is called *"Janeu",* that is the ceremony in which a boy is invested with the sacred thread.

The Significance of the ceremony: In the beginning the Upanayana ceremony must have been very simple. In the early times when the sacred Vedic lore was handed down from generation to generation, the father himself was the guru. The Upanayana ceremony is selected for performance when the sun is in the northern hemisphere (Uttarayana). A day before the ceremony, the most auspicious gods and goddesses such as Ganesha, Sri Lakshmi, Dhrti, Medha, Pusti, Sraddha and Saraswati are worshipped. The previous night, the child is smeared all over with a yellowish powder (Turmeric powder) and he is commanded to spend the whole night in absolute silence. This is a mystic rite to prepare the child for the second birth. The turmeric powder is symbolic of embryonic atmosphere and absolute silence made the boy a speechless embryo anew.

The next morning the child Is given a ceremonial bath and shave. After the bath the boy is given 'Kaupina' (Loin-cloth) to cover his private parts. Though social consciousness has already dawned upon the mind of the boy, from now he has to observe social decorum and maintain his own dignity and self-respect. The boy then goes to the Acharya and announces his intention to become a Brahmachari. Accepting his request the Acharya offers him clothes. The Hindu idea of decorum requires that when engaged in a religious ceremony, the upper

part of the body should be covered with a piece of cloth. On the occasion of the Upanayana, therefore, the young scholar is offered an upper garment because now his proper religious life has begun. Originally the upper garment used to be a piece of deerskin, which symbolized spiritual and intellectual pre-eminence. By putting on the upper garment the student is enjoined to become a youth of ideal character and deep scholarship.

Next the Acharya ties a girdle round the waist of the youth. This Is made of triple strands, which symbolises that the student is always encircled by the three Vedas and to inform him that his belt is “a daughter of faith and a sister of the sages, possessing the power of protecting his purity and chastity and keeping him, away from evil”.

RITUALS, PRACTICES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE
Part Two

The Sacred thread: After the tying of the girdle is the most Important item of the ceremony, namely investing the student with the sacred thread. It is spun by a virgin Brahmin girl and twisted by a Brahmin. Its length is ninety-six times the breadth of the four fingers of a man, which is equal to his height. Each of the four fingers represents one of the four states the soul of a man experiences from time to time, namely waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep and absolute Brahmanhood. The three strands of the thread are also symbolical. They represent the three Gunas (qualities) namely reality (Sattva) , passion (Rajas) and inertia (Tamas). The twist of the thread must be upward, to ensure that the Sattva guna or the good quality of reality may predominate in a man and he may attain spiritual merits. The three strands remind the wearer that he has to pay off his debt to the ancient seers, his ancestors and the gods. He is to honour his parents and elders and is now in a position to participate in the family rituals and prayers.

The three strands are tied together by a knot called “Brahmagranthi”, which symbolises Brahma, Vishnu and Siva (the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer.).

A Brahmachari can put on only one set of the sacred thread. A householder is given the privilege to wear two, one for himself and one for his wife. While performing the auspicious ceremony one should wear the sacred thread hanging from his left shoulder, but while performing an inauspicious ceremony it should be hung from right shoulder. To the three strands of the sacred thread is tied a piece of deerskin which is symbolical of holy lustre and intellectual and spiritual pre-eminence. The student, while putting it on is reminded that he should attain the spiritual and intellectual position of a Rishi (Sage).

The Acharya then presents a staff to remind the student that he is a traveler on the long road of knowledge. While accepting it, the student prays that he may reach safely the end of his long and arduous journey.

After the student is equipped as above, the teacher pours water in the cupped hands of the student. It is symbolical of purifying the student, to sanctify him, before he could legitimately learn the Gayatri mantra. The student is then asked to look at the sun to remind him that like the sun he should observe his duties and disciplines unswervingly. He is reminded that the sun is witness to all actions, he is the Lord of all vows, time, action and virtues, and therefore, he should be properly worshipped.

After this, the teacher touches the heart of the pupil reaching over his right shoulder with the words: ‘into my heart will I take thy heart” This is intended to emphasise that the relation between the teacher and the taught is not formal and mercenary but real and sacred. There should be complete harmony, a deep sympathy and whole-hearted communion between the guru (Teacher) and the initiated.

The student is then asked to mount the stone to remind him that he should be firm and strong in physique and character like the stone. This is a sermon to the student that the firmness of determination and strength of character are the most essential needs for a successful career.

The Gayatri mantra: Next the most sacred Gayatri mantra is taught to the student. The teacher, looking at the face of the child, utters the Gayatri mantra: “Let us meditate on the most excellent light of the creator (the sun). May he guide our Intellect.” The mantra is recited pada by pada, (word by word): then by hemistich by hemistich and the third time the whole verse. The teaching of the sacred Gayatri mantra signalises the second birth of the child, as the teacher is regarded the father and Gayatri the mother of the child.

After the investiture of the sacred thread, the student secures the qualification to perform the rite of enkindling and feeding the sacred fire. The student wipes with his hand the ground where the fire is built with the formula: “Agni (fire) glorious one, make me glorious. As thou glorious Agni, art glorious, thus, O! glorious one, bring me to glory. As thou Agni are the preserver of the treasure of sacrifice for the gods thus may I become the preserver of the treasure of the Vedas for men.” Then he puts fuels in the fire with the prayer: “To Agni (fire) I have brought a piece of wood, to the great Jata Vedas. As thou, Agni, are inflamed by wood, thus I am inflamed by life, insight, vigor, offspring, cattle, holy lustre. May my teacher be the father of living sons: May I be full of insight, not forgetful of what I have learnt; May I become full of glory and splendor of holy lustre and enjoyer of food.” The sacred fire is the symbol of life and light, for which the student strives.

The ceremony of going round for alms is the next item. On the day of the Upanayana, the Brahmachari begs food from only those who would not refuse, e.g. his mother and other relatives. The decorum requires that a Brahmin student should beg alms with the following words: ”Bhavati bhiksham dehi” (Lady, give me alms).

Triratra vrata: After the initiation ceremonies, the student Is required to observe three days' continence, which is called “Triratra Vrata.”. It is the beginning of a rigorous training. He is not to eat saline food, he has to sleep on the ground, he is forbidden to take meat and to sleep in the daytime. At the end of the vrata, the Medhajanana ritual is performed to evoke divine help in the sharpening of the intellect, memory and retentive power. It is called medhajanana because by performing it one could get intellect fit to grasp the Vedic knowledge. If the student acts up to the symbolisms and suggestions of the ritual, he is bound to be a successful scholar and full-fledged man, fit to share the responsibilities of the world.

The Samavartana or Snana (End of Studentship) : The ritual is performed at the close of the Brahmacharya period and it marks the termination of the student life. Samavartana means, “returning home from the house of the guru”. It is also called Snana because bathing formed the most prominent item of the Samskara.

In our ancient literature, learning is compared to an ocean, and one who possessed great learning is supposed to have crossed that ocean. Naturally, the student who has completed his course of studies is regarded as a person who has crossed the ocean of learning. He is called Vidyasnataka (one who has bathed in vows). Thus the ceremonial bath at the end of the student career symbolises the crossing of the ocean of learning by the student.

The Upanayana marks the dawn of a new era in the life of the initiate. He is no more a child and is introduced to the life of perfect and stern discipline. The ceremony symbolizes the fact that the student is a traveler, starting for the boundless realm of knowledge. To reach his destination, he is asked to be firm and steadfast like a stone in his determination. Complete harmony between him and his teacher is essential. In his mission the student is assured the help of all gods and creatures. The ideals before him are Indra, the lord of all gods, and Agni, the most brilliant element in the world, the one suggestive of power and position and the other indicative of life & light.

The close of one’s student life is very momentous period in ones life. One has to make a choice between the two paths of life-either to get married and plunge into the busy life of the world, sharing its full responsibilities or to keep off from the turmoil of the world and to lead a life of detachment, both physical and mental. Those students who choose the first path are called “Upakurvana”, and those who select the second path are known as Naisthika. The upakurvanas returned from their gurukulas and become householders. The Naisthikas did not leave their teachers and lived in the services of their masters in quest of supreme knowledge.

After the formal education is complete, man enters the second stage or the second Ashram, namely the Grahastha Ashram where he gets married, protects and looks after the family’s means of livelihood.

Chapter 4

THE VIVAHA

(MARRIAGE CEREMONIES)
- Part One

The Vivaha is the most Important of all the Hindu rituals. Even during the Vedic period the marriage ceremonies had been developed and they have found literary expression in the Rigveda and the Atharvaveds. Marriage received great importance even in early times. The Smritis entirely endorse the Ashrama system and emphatically prescribed that a man should marry after completing his student life. “Having spent the first fourth part of his life in the house of the guru, the second fourth part of his life in his own house with his wife, the third part in forests, one should take sanyasa (Renunciation) in the fourth part. One who spends his life in this manner having conquered all the stages of life would attain enlightenment.

The Smritis highly praise the life of a householder. They call it the best Ashrama and regard it as the centre and prop of the whole social structure. Just as all creatures exist depending on air, so does society depend upon the householder. Because the householder supports the other three orders, his order is the highest. One who longs for imperishable heaven and happiness in this world should uphold the Grahastha Ashrama.

The purest and the most evolved method of marriage is Brahma. It is so called because it is thought fit for the Brahmins. The Smritis regard it the most honourable type of marriage, as it is free from physical force, Imposition of conditions and lure of money.

The marriageable age: In Rig Vedic times no girl was married before she had reached womanhood. During the period of the “Ramayana” and the “Mahabharata” also girls were grown up at the time of their marriage.

The ceremony: When the proper selection of the bride and the bridegroom is made, the ceremonies relating to marriage begins. In the beginning they must have been very simple. But as marriage is a very important occasion in the community, many rites, practices and customs arose, which were regulated by the community Itself. As marriage is a festive event in the communal life, all sorts of mirth and amusements are associated with it in form of feasts, music, dance, etc. Decoration of the house and adornment of the bride and the bridegroom express aesthetic motives natural to any important event in social life.

There are a number of ceremonies, which are suggestive of the various features in a marriage. The relatives of the bride have some right over her, therefore, it is necessary that she should be given in marriage in their presence. A large group of ceremonies are symbolical, One group of them symbolises the union between the wife and the husband. For example, Joining of hands, tying of garments, touching of heart etc. has for their motives the union of the pair. Another group of ceremonies has their origin in desire to promote the fertility of the union or to ensure the abundance of food for the household. Some ceremonies are connected with the idea that some danger is attendant on every transitional period of life and it should be averted by proper rites. Since marriage inaugurated the most important epoch in one’s life, many ceremonies are performed to ward off the evil influences connected with the event.

Betrothal: The preliminary part of the marriage ceremonies consisted in the Vagdanam (Betrothal) or oral giving away of the bride to the bridegroom.

Amongst the Sindhis, during the engagement, *misri* (crystal sugar) is brought by the boy’s family for the girl thereby denoting that the engagement is confirmed and merry-making may start. The Hindus consider eating of sweet auspicious.

A bowl of fruit is placed on the girl's lap, which is symbolic of bestowing prosperity, and happiness accompanied with the blessing that she may bear strong and healthy children.

The couple exchanges engagement rings. This custom dates back to the ancient Egyptians and is probably a modern addition to the Hindu rituals. The ring is worn on the third finger of the hand because it is believed that, that finger has a vein that leads directly to the heart.

The ring is normally golden. Since gold is supposed to last forever, it is believed that its use would bless the couple with a long and prosperous married life.

After the engagement ceremony, the Sindhis have what is called the "Sagri" ceremony.

Here the sisters of the bridegroom come to dress up the girl and adorn her with flowers. Maybe that was the way to get to know the girl a little better and make her more comfortable, as she would soon be a part of the family.

A little "attar" (perfume) is licked by the "to-be bride" maybe to bring fragrance to the tongue, literally and metaphorically!

After the Sagri the "Ghari Pujan" is done both in the brides house as well as the bridegroom's. Here married ladies whose husbands are alive are made to grind wheat and pound turmeric, to symbolise that now the merriment is starting, food will be required for the guests. The above ritual is also to symbolise that the house should always prosper irrespective of the fact that the luck may change In the bride's house because their girl leaving or in the bridegroom's house because a girl will be entering it

The boy fills his cupped hands with grain and offers it to the priest. This is to indicate that even though he is entering the Grahastha Ashram he will never forget to give charity and to look after those less fortunate than him. Oil and turmeric root is rubbed by the respective mothers on the bride's and groom's hands, feet and backbone. This is what is called anointing with oil and it is a form of cosmetic besides helping their physical bodies to become stronger as the turmeric root and oil contain medicinal properties.

The bride's and the groom's respective mothers then along with the husbands of their elder daughters step out of their houses with pot of water on their heads.

This pot of water is placed outside the house and a knife is passed through it to break any evil spell.

The family's son-in-law would be there as a protector against any intruder or dacoits. They then enter the house amidst a great racket, which they create, to ward off any evil spirits that may want to cast an evil eye on the marriage festivals.

The bride and the groom are made to wear old clothes which are torn by relatives and friends amidst merriment to denote that their old life is now over and that they are now on the threshold of a new one.

Some people claim that it is to make them look shabby so that their beauty comes out in full glory on their wedding day.

The Nuptial Bath: In the morning the bride and the bridegroom at their respective homes take the nuptial bath with scented water and recital of Vedic verses indicative of the physical union of the husband and the wife. Then the marriage party from the bridegroom's side proceeds to the place of the bride's father. In the second half of the day the bridegroom bathes, puts on a pair of white clothes, decorates himself with scent and garlands and prays to the family gods.

The Marriage Party: On arrival, the bridegroom stands outside the gate of the house facing the east and is welcomed by a group of women bearing lamps and jars full of water.

Amongst the Sindhis the bride is made to come out to receive the groom where he places his foot on hers to denote that he should be the dominating force in their future life together. The bride's mother and father then wash the feet of the bridegroom. This is because they believe that due to all the prayers that have preceded that moment the bridegroom is an embodiment of Lord Vishnu for that particular day.

After the marriage however he would not allow his in-laws to touch his feet ever again as after that day he is to consider them his parents and give them their due respect.

The bridegrooms finally enters the bride's house and here, normally, his brother's wife would adorn the new bride with jewels. The end of the sari of the bride is tied to a piece of cloth across the bridegroom's neck on his shoulder, and their hands are tied with a string, which has been blessed by prayers.

The bride takes with herself gifts in clothes and ornaments given by her parents, which is commonly known as dowry. The dowry custom has not only been an Indian custom, but was practiced by the Europeans as well.

As a matter of fact the word trousseau is derived from a French word "trusse" which consisted of a few valuable items presented by the brides parents.

The dowry ensured that the bride would be recipient of the share of her father's property besides being a security for her future.

Of course, during those days, it was just a graceful gift by the father and the amount would depend upon how much he could afford.

THE VIVAHA

(MARRIAGE CEREMONIES)
- Part Two

The Wedding Ceremony : The wedding ceremony is basically performed by the couple, the bride's parents and the groom's parents. However, the bride's brother, bride's uncle (mother's brother) are also called upon to give away the bride.

The planet worship or the Graha Pujan, which I have explained earlier, is then performed.

A number of homas (rituals) follow, the chief among them being Rastrabhrt, Jaya, Abhyatana and Laja Homa. The first contains prayers for victory and protection from hostile powers known or unknown to the bridegroom. The last homa is a ritual symbolical of prosperity. The brother of the bride pouts fried grains mixed with sami leaves out of his cupped hands into her cupped hands. The bride offers them with firmly joined hands to the fire while the bridegroom recites the verses : "To the God Aryman the girl has made sacrifice, to Agni; may He, loosen his hold on her, not from the husband's side; may he, husband live long: may relations be prosperous. May this sacrifice bring prosperity to thee, and may it unite me with thee. May Agni (God of Fire) grant us that."

Panigrahana: The panigrahana or the grasping of the bride's hand comes next. The bridegroom seizes the right hand of the bride with "I seize thy hand for the sake of happiness, that thou mayest live to old age with me, thy husband. Bhaga, Aryama, Savitr. Purandhi, these gods have given thee to me, that art thou. That art thou, this am I. The Saman am I, the Rk thou: the Heaven I, the Earth thou: Come let us marry. Let us beget offspring. Let us acquire many sons and may they reach old age. Loving, bright with genial minds, may we see a hundred autumns. May we hear a hundred autumns." This ceremony is symbolical of the taking charge of responsibility of the girl. The responsibility is very sacred, as the girl is supposed to be given not only by his father but also the above guardian deities who are witnesses to every solemn contract. The prayer in the end is suggestive of a fruitful, prosperous and happy married life.

Mounting the stone: In order to make the wife firm in her devotion and fidelity to him, the husband makes her tread on a stone to the north of the fire, with her right foot, repeating the verse: "Tread on this stone, like a stone be firm. Tread the foes down; turn away the enemies." The stone, here, is symbolical of firmness and strength in crushing the enemies. This ceremony is known as Asmarohana or "Mounting the stone".

Agni pradakshina: The couple then go round the fire while the husband recites the following formula: "Thee they have in the beginning carried round Surya with the bridal procession. May thou give back, Agni, to the husband the wife together with offspring."

The Saptapadi: Then the great Saptapadi or the rite of seven steps takes place. The husband makes the wife walk forward seven steps in a northern direction with the words: "One step for sap, two for Juice, three for the prospering of wealth, four for comforts, five for cattle, six for the seasons and seven for performing homas." The objects referred to in the above formula are essential for felicity. This ceremony is very important from the legal point of view as marriage is regarded legally complete only after it is performed.

They then pray that God will provide them with the strength, courage and integrity to:

1. Fulfill social, religious duties and responsibilities.
2. Share their wealth and possessions.
3. Share each other's happiness and sorrows.
4. Protect themselves from the five inherent enemies, i.e. passion, anger, greed, attachment and ego.
5. Attain true enjoyment of all seasons.
6. Be faithful in mind and body.
7. Be associates in the worship of God, in the performance of Dharma (right deeds), in the acquisition of property and fulfillment of desires.

After the Saptapadi, water is sprinkled on the bride's head and the formula is chanted: "The blessed, the most blessed waters, the peaceful ones, the most peaceful ones, may they give medicine to thee." Water is famous for possessing sanctifying properties among all religions. By this ceremony the bride is supposed to be free from physical troubles and sanctified for the married life.

Next the husband touches the heart of the bride reaching over her right shoulder, with the words: "Into my heart will I take thy heart: thy mind shall dwell In my mind: in my world thou shall rejoice with all thy heart; May (prajapati) the Lord join thee to me." The heart is the centre of feelings. By touching it the husband symbolically tries to rouse them to make them flow out to meet his own heart and thus unite them in the world of love.

Now the bridegroom invites the assembled guests and relatives to bless the bride, reciting the verses over her:

"Auspicious ornaments does this woman wear. Come to her and behold her and bless her." The sindura-dana or painting of red vermilion on the head of the bride by the bridegroom takes place on this occasion. This ceremony is called "Sumanagali". At this stage of the marriage ceremonies, a number of rites are performed in conformance with the local customs and traditions, such as tying of the garments of the bride and the bridegroom, touching the cup of the banyan tree, touching the nose at the arrival of bridegroom, besmearing the chest of the bridegroom with curd, etc.

Though the ceremony proper ends at this point, a number of ceremonies relating to marriage still remain to be performed. The first few are symbolical in their nature. The bride is required to look at the sun, if the marriage takes place in the daytime. In the night the bridegroom shows to the bride the pole star and says: "Firm art thou, I see thee, the firm one. Firm be thou with me, O thriving one. To me Brahaspati has given thee; obtaining offspring through me, thy husband, live with me a hundred autumns." According to other authorities Arundhati star and the Saptarshi-Mandala (constellation of stars) should be also shown to the bride. Whether she sees them or not, she is asked to reply when a question is put to her, "I see. " These performances are suggestive of firmness in the conjugal life.

After the marriage the wife is supposed to sit on man's left-hand side. The reason may be to leave the right hand of man free to protect her and himself against any intruder or any harm.

During the marriage ceremony the bride's and the groom's heads are clasped together to denote that they are two and henceforth they should be one in body and spirit. They both will also enjoy one destiny from now onwards.

The man expresses that he accepts her the way she is, by placing her five fingers on his forehead.

In our mythology, a woman has always worshipped her husband as her God, and by doing so it is claimed by our legends that she sometimes achieved tremendous powers.

This theory is based upon the theory of Bhakti (devotion of selfless service)

The quality of devotion instills humility within the devotee. Whom you are devoted to is immaterial; It may be to the country, to a cause, to scientific pursuit, or to a person; however the spiritual uplift that the devotee acquires by selfless service is tremendous.

Being a pativrata (husband-devotee) in no way proves that woman was inferior to man. In olden days It was considered that for a man to lead a perfect life, four things were essential: Dharma (Right deeds), Artha (Acquisition of property), Kama (Fulfillment of desires) and Mokaha (Salvation of the soul), and it was customary amongst certain Hindu communities for the groom to follow the bride three times round the fire as that denoted that a woman was the embodiment of the three qualities necessary for a perfect life-Dharma, Artha and Kama. As a matter of fact, certain religious rituals were not considered complete unless the wife participated with the man, and a couple was referred to as “Dampati” which signified their unity in what they did and thought and they were likened to the two wheels of a cart, both enjoying equal importance if they were to make any progress on the road of life,

After the wedding ceremony is over the couple leave for the groom’s house. Here, the feet of the bride are washed. Then a cover is placed over her head while she is made to sprinkle water on all corners of the house. This denotes that she should keep the respect of the family, and veil its shortcomings, and if there are any fights or misunderstandings within the family, she is supposed to cool them.

Among some communities it is also a custom to hold lit diyas (flames on small containers made of clay) on the bride’s head to denote that as she enters the house she should spread light all around her. The groom breaks a coconut in many Hindu ceremonies we have the above custom.

In the Hindu religion it is claimed that to reach anywhere spiritually you ought to get rid of the ego: the ego is a hard nut to crack, and that is what the coconut stands for; (the breaking of the ego is what we hope to achieve by breaking the coconut).

Amongst the Sindhis they have the custom of performing Datar, in which salt is exchanged from the bride’s hands to the groom’s hand three times. The bride also does the same with all the relatives from the in-law side.

It is commonly believed by the Sindhis that if you do the above there will be no arguments or fights between the bride and themselves. When salt mixes with food it loses its identity, it mingles totally with the ingredients of the meal, however, the presence of salt is felt because it gives the food taste.

Similarly, by exchanging salt, the family subtly tells the new bride that she is going to be part of the new family and she should mingle with them like salt does with food.

Amongst the Hindus it is also believed that if you eat the salt of anybody’s house, you ought to always be faithful to that family. Exchanging salt is also symbolic of the above belief.

The girl’s name is sometimes changed when she gets married. This is done to remind her that she will be starting a fresh life with a fresh name. Also, the changing of the bride’s name has a lot to do with Numerology, in cases where the family priest after comparing the boy’s and girl’s name decides that the bride should change her name as it would be better for both the parties in their future life together.

The day after the wedding, the bride normally goes back to her mother’s house for the day. The merriment continues until most of the relatives that may have come to attend the wedding leave for their respective houses.

Symbolism of Hindu Marriages: A symbol is a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought. A symbol is not important by itself. It has only a vehicular value and conveys something beyond it. It is a mode of expression, which vivifies abstract, subtle, unfamiliar or supernatural ideas before common folk. In ancient times when human fancy was stronger and the human speech was not adequately developed to express every shade of thought, symbols played a very important part. In religion and mythology they were commonly used. But even now they have not lost their value. The most up-to-date political ideology, which recognises little use of religion, employs symbols for its ends and ideals.

Sacramental marriage and symbol: Hindu marriage which the nuptials solemnize is not a social contract in the modern sense of the term, but a religious institution, a sacrament. By it is meant that besides the two human parties, the bride and the' bridegroom, there is a third superhuman, spiritual or divine element in marriage. The physical conditions of the two parties are always subject to change and, as such, they cannot form the permanent basis of marriage. It is on the third element on which the permanent relationship between the husband and the wife depends. The husband and the wife are responsible not only to each other, but they owe a greater allegiance to this third element. This is the religious or mystic touch in the purely social and material contract between a man and a woman. Without it the conjugal life loses its charm and durability. The mystic aspect of Hindu marriage necessitates the use of a number of symbols.

Thus the general function of the Hindu marriage is to cover all the aspects of married life. The biological significance, the critical nature, the physical and mental union of the couple moderation, the social transition and sacrifice, these are the main features of the Hindu nuptials. They have been symbolically suggested but not described in transparent prose, because conveyed through symbols, they are better emphasized and become more eloquent and telling.

Marriage and social change : The nuptials, in their utterances, promises, hopes and fears, symbolise a great social transition in the life of the bride and the bridegroom. They are no longer irresponsible youths depending upon their parents for their bread and views. The seriousness of life dawns upon them. They forsake their old families to form a new one. They have to run an independent home, earn their own livelihood, procreate children, and discharge their obligations towards society. This is a life of responsibilities and cares. It is only in this sense that Hindu marriage or Vivaha can properly be understood which means to lift, to support, to hold up, and to sustain. This involves a great compromise and mutual sacrifice.

Those who marry only for pleasure are sorely disappointed. The essential difficulties of life are not given a send off under the wedding canopy but, as a matter of fact, the conscious acceptance of responsibilities in life is going to be a veritable lesson in human endurance. We no doubt talk of a happy marriage. A happy marriage is however possible when, though being united physically, both partners contribute to each other's progress as individuals.

Khalil Gibran has rightly said of marriage : "You were born together, you shall be for ever more. You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days. Aye, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God. But let there be spaces in your togetherness. And let the winds of the heavens dance between you".

Chapter 5

CHILDBIRTH AND CHILDHOOD
Part One

According to Hindu Scriptures even the act of approaching his wife for intercourse is considered a sacred duty of a married man.

After the conception of a child is ascertained, the child in the womb is consecrated by the ritual named *Pumsavana.* Pumsavana is generally understood as a rite “for quickening a male child.” The ceremony is performed in the third month of pregnancy after conception becomes manifest.

The significance of the ritual consists in its main features. It should be performed when the moon is on a male constellation. This period is regarded as favourable for producing a male issue. Inserting the Juice of the banyan tree into the nostril of the pregnant women is meant for preventing abortion. Susruta (father of Indian medicine) says that the banyan tree has got the properties of removing all kinds of troubles during pregnancy, such as excess of bile, burning sensation etc. He says, “after pounding herbs and mixing them with milk, three or four drops of the juice should be inserted in the nostril of the pregnant woman. She should not spit the juice out.” Insertion of medicine into nostrils is a common, thing in the Hindu System of treatment. It is, therefore, obvious that the above ritual is undoubtedly founded on the medical experience of the people. Putting a dish of water on the lap of the pregnant woman is a symbolical act. A pot full of water denotes life and spirit in the would-be child. Touching the womb emphasized the necessity of taking every care by the expectant mother so that the foetus should be healthy and strong in the womb and abortion may not take place.

The duties of a pregnant woman: Our ancients realised that the conduct of an expectant mother influenced the unborn child. So, after laying down rules and regulations about the prenatal rituals, they prescribed the duties of a pregnant women and her husband.

A pregnent women was made to observe purity and read religious books which would keep her calm and so would help the unborn foetus.

She was told not to go near the seas, or trenches, avoid strenuous exercise and not to bathe in the river. She should not go to a deserted house nor sit on an anthill as the son of Garbhahanta (Destroyer of foetus) would attack her.

Needless to say that would surely be the case if she did not observe the above safety rules.

Further she was told not to scratch the earth with her nails, not to go too near charcoal and ashes and not to leave her hair disheveled. The above seem to me to be perfect rules for personal hygiene, which would be in perfect accordance with the Do’s and Don’ts for a modern pregnant lady.

The duties of the husband were not to make unnecessary demands upon the wife and to try and fulfil most of her wishes so that she remained calm and happy. Thus we see that every possible care was taken to preserve the physical and mental health of the pregnant women, and we observe that the rules laid down all had a medical basis designed to promote her well-being.

In most Hindu families it is believed that a pregnant women should relax in bed during an eclipse.

It is wise, even for the rest of us, to take care during an eclipse as science has discovered that people who hurt themselves by way of a cut or a fracture, during an eclipse take a longer to heal as the blood flow seems to be more during that time than at any other time.

Bacteria is more active during the eclipse period, hence our belief in changing the drinking water in our vessels and cooking fresh food.

We all know that harm can be caused to the eye by looking at the sun or the moon during an eclipse. Also science is at the moment conducting experiments on the effects of the eclipse on the unborn foetus.

Finally, the child makes his advent in to the world. When the child is born, the moment of his birth is noted with meticulous care, for preparing the horoscope, as the position of the planets at the precise moment of his birth would determine his character and landmarks of his future life.

If a boy was born there was rejoicing as they felt that he would have the right to continue the family's line of business and look after his parents during old age as well as perform the rites after their death.

However, getting a daughter was no less meritorious during the Vedic period as we see that girls did enjoy the position of learning wisdom and she enjoyed the position of bringing it light the names of two families (that of her father's and that of her husband's) if she turned out to be virtuous and worthy. Hence, Sita, besides enjoying an unequalled place in mythology for being her own self, was equally well known as Rama's wife as well as "Janak Dulari" (Daughter of Janaka).

A girl was desired during the Vedic period also because "Kanyadaan" (giving away of a daughter in marriage. was considered as one of the worthiest of deeds. It is not a degrading custom as considered by modern women as Hindus always believed that the giver was greater than the receiver.

Medhajanana: Now the Jatakarma ceremonies properly commence. The first ceremony is the Medhajanana or *producing of intelligence to the baby.* This is performed the next day after the birth.

The father with his ring finger with a gold ring gives to the child honey and ghee. With each feeding he utters one word of the Gayatri mantra, namely; "Bhu" with the first feeding: "Bhuvah" with the second feeding; "Svah" with the third feeding; "Bhur Bhuvah Svah" with the fourth feeding.

The Medhajanana ceremony speaks of the high concern of the Hindus about the intellectual well-being of the child. Also the things fed to the child are conducive to the mental growth. According to Susruta the following are the properties of ghee: It is producer of beauty, it is greasy and sweet, It is remover of hysteria, head-ache, epilepsy, fever, indigestion, excess of bile. It helps in fostering digestion, memory, intellect, talent and lusture.

Ayusya: The next item of the Jatakarma ceremony is the *Ayusya or the rite* for *ensuring a long life for the child.* Near the navel or the right ear of the baby the father murmurs: "Agni is long-lived, through the trees. By that long life, I make thee long-lived. Soma is long-lived, through the herbs. The Brahman is long-lived through observances. Sacrifice is long-lived through the sacrificial fire. The ocean is long-lived through the rivers."

Thus all the possible instances of long life are cited before the child, and by the association of ideas it is believed that with these utterances, the life of the baby would also be lengthened.

Childbirth and Childhood
Part Two

Namakarana (Name-giving ceremony): The Hindus attach great importance to the naming of the child. According to them the name should be of two syllables or four syllables beginning with a consonant, with a semi-vowel in it, and with a long vowel at the end. According to their belief, one who is desirous of holy lusture, his name should contain four syllables. For boys, names with an even number of syllables are prescribed. For naming a girl, a different basis is adopted. The name should contain an uneven number of syllables.. It should end in aa or ee. The name of a girl should contain three syllables. It should be easy to pronounce, pleasing to hear, of clear meaning, charming, auspicious, ending in a long vowel. The naming ceremony is performed on the 10th/ 11th/12th day after the birth of the child. The syllables of the name are also based on the science of numerology.

Annaprasana (First solid feeding): The feeding of the child with solid food is the next important stage in the life of the child. Till now it is being fed on the mother's milk. After six or seven months the child will require a greater amount and different types of food, while the quantity of the mother's milk is diminished. So for the benefit of the child and the mother the child should be weaned away from the mother, and some substitute for her milk should be given to the baby. The first feeding ceremony is performed in the sixth month after the birth of the child.

The significance of the Annaprasana ceremony is that the children are weaned away from their mothers at the proper time.

The chudakarma (Tonsure): The purpose of this ceremony is the achievement of long life for the child. According to Hindu scriptures life is prolonged by tonsure; according to susruta, shaving and cutting the hair and nails remove impurities and give lightness, prosperity and courage to the child. Charaka opines that cutting and dressing of hair, beard and nails give strength, vigour, life, purity and beauty. At the basis of this ceremony the idea of health and beauty is prominent.

Tonsure ceremony is normally performed on the thirteenth month, third or fifth year of the child. It is performed only in the daytime. The obvious reason is that hair cutting in the night is dangerous. The system of keeping tuft on the top of the head has significance. This is meant for the long life of the child. The question may be asked why did the Hindu sages suppose that the keeping of tuft hair on the top of the head would prolong one's life? Is there any connection between longevity and the top-hair? According to susruta, inside the head, near the top, is the joint of a sira (artery) and Sandhi (a critical juncture). There in the eddy of the hairs is the vital spot called Adhipathi (overload). Any injury to this part causes sudden death. The protection of this vital part by keeping a tuft of hair just over the vital part serves this purpose.

Karnavedha (Boring the ears): Boring of different limbs for wearing ornaments was prevalent among ancient peoples all over the world. Even when civilization progressed, ornamentation continued. In the case of boring ears, it is undoubtedly ornamental in its origin, but later on it proved to be useful. Susruta says, the ears of a child should be bored for protection from diseases and decoration. He explicitly prescribes boring of ears for preventing hernia. This should not be too difficult to accept now that medical science has taken notice of acupuncture.

This ceremony is performed at a very early age of the child because boring the ear would be easier and less painful to the child.

Vidyarambha (Learning of Alphabets): This ceremony is performed in the fifth year of the child. When the sun is in the northern hemisphere an auspicious day is fixed for performing this ceremony. The child takes his bath and is properly dressed. He worships the Gods and a Homa (Yajna ritual) is performed. The ritual consists in writing and reading. Saffron, and other substances are scattered on a silver plate and letters are written with a gold pen, or on rice with any pen suitable for the occasion. The following phrases are written: "Salutation to Ganesa. Salutation to Saraswati, Salutation to family gods and goddesses. Salutation to Narayana and Lakshmi."

This shows that the child was introduced to education along side the divinities worshipped by the family. The child would soon be old enough to start his formal education. Soon he would leave his parents after the thread ceremony and proceed for the Guru's ashram.

After his formal education was completed, the ancients would have the Samavartana ceremony or the Convocation Function.

The Samavartana ceremony was somewhat corresponding to the modern convocation function. It is only those who have passed their examinations who are at present admitted to the convocation. Similarly only those who had finished their education and observed all the vows were permitted to undergo the Samavartana ceremony.

Before the student would take his bath, he would take permission of his master to end his student career and satisfy him with a gurudakshina (an offering of cash or kind of the master as a token of appreciation for his effort In educating him.)

The Ceremonies and their Significance: The ceremonies opened with a very strange procedure. The student was required to shut himself up in a room throughout morning. It was done so that the sun would not be insulted by the superior lustre of the Snataka (learned student) as the former shines only with the light borrowed from the latter. At midday the student would come out of the room, embrace the feet of the teacher and pays his last tribute to the Vedic fire by putting some fuel in it. Eight vessels full of water were kept, indicating the eight quarters of the earth and suggesting the idea of honour and praise being showered on the student from all over the earth. Then the student would draw water out of one vessel. The body of a student was heated with the fire of austerity and penance; hence for the comfortable life of a householder the body required a cooling influence, which was symbolised by bathing.

After the grand bath, the student casts off his entire outfit e.g. the Mekhala, the deerskin, the staff etc. into water and puts on a new loincloth. He cuts his beard, lock of hair, nails and cleanses his teeth. The symbolism of the bath was that the student had practiced continence both in food and speech, and now he was going to prepare himself for a fuller and more active life of the world. The austere life of the student was over and the many comforts and luxuries of life denied to him during his Brahmacharya were presented to him. He was given a bath in fragrant water. He put on new garments and received flowers and garlands. Dressed in his new attire the student would proceed to the nearest assembly of the learned in a chariot or on an elephant. There he was introduced as a competent scholar by his teacher.

A survey of the Samavartana ceremony shows how high was the respect in which scholars, who had completed their education, were held by society in ancient India.

Chapter 6

RITUALS CONNECTED WITH DEATH

After the child returned from the formal education he would take over the family's means of livelihood and he would take a wife who would take over the reins of the household.

Hence the elder couple of the house would now have more time to devote to their spiritual pursuits; until finally, when they were ready, they would take "sanyas" which meant that they would literally renounce the world. They would proceed for the forest and meditate upon the deeper values of life until their breath ceased.

In Hindu philosophy, death has been compared to the 'shedding off' of an old garment for a new one.

Amongst the Hindus, when a person dies he is immediately laid on the floor and a small flame is lit near the body. The body is laid out on the floor so that the germs that emanate from the corpse do not spread on the mattress. The Hindus believe that when a man dies his spirit comes out from the body and, because of his attachment to his family and material possessions, continues to inhabit his home. Since the spirit does not possess a physical form any more, the Hindus believe that it rests on the flame that has been lit near the dead body.

The Hindus cremate the body, symbolizing that all elements present in the body return to the elements present in the Cosmos. Then there is a period of prayers in the home of the deceased. In the case of the Sindhis, it normally lasts for a period of 12 days.

Psychologists and philosophers claim that time is the greatest healer; and prayer is our greatest help in times of sorrow.

During the twelve days of prayer after the death of a person there is frenzied activity in the house. The priests have to be fed. Prayers have to be performed. Guests drop in for condolence. In other words there is not much time to think.

After the formal period of prayer is over, the sorrow and a feeling of loss strike the bereaved person but by then, he has had time to accept the loss to a certain degree and he knows that he has to somehow go on with the business of living. On the 10th day after the persons death the diya (flame) which had been lit in the house is carried to the sea, after night-long prayers.

The immersion of the diya into the sea is to inform the spirit that now he should truly break attachment with the former life, and start his progress in the world beyond. It is however difficult to forget the loved one who has departed.

So, once a year, the devout Hindu feeds a pandit (priest), what the departed soul liked to eat during his lifetime, believing that by feeding a priest the departed soul would get satisfaction. This system is called "Shradh" and is derived from the word 'Shradha" which means faith and devotion.

Whether the cooked food fed to the Brahmin reaches the departed soul is debatable: however we know that love and devotion have no barriers.

Among the Christians it is common to offer a Mass for the dead and take flowers to the grave on the death anniversary of the departed soul.

From the various customs we have covered we see that even though the ritual of the customs differ to a certain degree in different creeds the underlying motive is the same.

After all, even though we may be belonging to different religions, we all belong to one big family of Humanity and as such our aspirations, needs, joys and sorrows cannot differ very much from one another.

We tend to fight with each other to prove which religion is truer but we forget that the message of all religions has been the same; and If we go down to the roots of all creeds the underlying message does not differ. After all, it has to be so, as Truth is always unchanging and eternal. It is my belief that it is the followers who interpret the same truth in different ways and come out with different conclusions.

Also, different practices and beliefs may have also emanated depending upon the cultural and geographic environment from where they sprouted.

After all, all religions believe in one God, who is omnipresent, omniscient and all-powerful. We all believe that God is Truth and God is Love.

All religions believe In the Power of Prayer. Muslims and Christians believe in Heaven and Hell that souls inherit after death depending upon their deeds here on earth; whereas Hindus believe that Heaven and Hell are on this plane itself, depending again upon the good or evil deeds committed. Thus we believe that when a soul enjoys joy and sense of contentment, he is in Heaven, whereas when he has no peace of mind, then he is in his own custom-made Hell.

The Upanishads claim that the Atman (God within us) cannot be reached through much learning or much use of the intellect. Jesus Christ proclaims: “Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The Katha Upanishad proclaims “The path is narrow as the edge of a razor.”

Jesus said : “Narrow Is the way which leads unto life.”

Hindus believe that we are a small part (atman) of the whole (Paramatma). In other words we are the same children of God and enjoy the same inherent qualities.

Christians also believe that man is made in the likeness of God, and the Kingdom of God is within each one of us. Jesus Christ claimed; “I and my Father are one”.

We Hindus believe in a trinity:

Brahma	Vishnu	Mahesh
(Creator)	(Preserver)	(Destroyer)

Christians believe in Father, Son and Holy Spirit

The occultists believe in Light, Love and Power

And Humanity at large believes in Mind, Body and Soul.

Chapter 7

SYMBOLISM OF DEITIES AND EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF HINDU SCRIPTURES

Since the beginning of Humanity man has believed in a certain power that governs the universe and he has felt a need to worship it. However, it was difficult for him to conceive of a God with no form or face. The wise old men understood this need of the common man. Maybe that was the reason why the deities were attributed to have four hands. That may have been intended to show that God has more powers and qualities than a normal human being.

Most of the deities are represented with the pointing finger touching the thumb of form a circle leaving the rest of the three fingers aside. This is called the Gyan Mudra or the symbol of true knowledge.

The pointing finger represents the Ego; the thumb the True consciousness or the Atman and the other three fingers represent body, mind and intellect.

We all know that the hand is ineffective without the thumb; similarly the body is ineffective without the true spirit that resides in it. So. when leaving the body, mind and intellect aside, the ego surrenders to true consciousness; it becomes eternal as symbolised by the circle formed by the joining of pointing finger and thumb.

Lord Shiva has been called the Nataraja - The Lord of the Dance, Birth and death, formation and decay, change and movement occur all the time as it is the law of the universe. The above is symbolised in the dance of Siva.

Lord Ganesh is one of our earliest deities and as explained earlier is always worshipped before any other God, during any ceremonial prayer because he is considered to be the dispeller of obstacles.

Then why did the masses give an elephant head to one whom they wanted to worship as the Almighty? The legend claims that Lord Siva had cut his own son, Ganesha's head in a fit of temper and when his wife Parvathi implored him to restore her son's life, he promised to do so.

Lord Siva said that he would cut the head of the first living creature that passed by and use it to replace his son's head, and that is what He did. However, it makes me wonder why Lord Siva said that He would cut the head of the first living creature that passed. The theory is far-fetched, but could Lord Siva have performed head transplant?

After all. Eric Van Daniken In his book Chariots of the Gods does claim that humanity was very advanced in early history and far-fetched theories like the above one should be taken literally. Also there are some ancient paintings, in which what seems like, transplants of internal organs!

The above is, as far as the literal story of Sri Ganesh, goes.

Let us come to the symbolic aspect. Lord Ganesh has big ears denoting that God is able to hear everything. The long trunk of an elephant has the quality of being able to uproot a tree; and at the same time pick up a tiny needle from a haystack which is again a quality attributed to the Lord as we believe that in spite of his great power, the tiniest creature does not pass unnoticed by Him. Lord Ganesh's large belly denotes prosperity.

His carriage is a rat. How could an elephant sit on a rat? Seems absurd-but It is not so. The lord in spite of being the Lord of the Cosmos attends to our Earth which is but a speck of dust in the universe.

The Hindus worship the Goddess Lakshmi. She is considered the Goddess of wealth and is the consort of Lord Vishnu, the Preserver of mankind.

According to the scriptures and paintings that have come down from ancient times, if the Goddess Lakshmi travels alone she travels on an owl. If she travels with Lord Vishnu she travels on the Garuda (Eagle).

Swami Nirmal Chetan explains the symbolism thus. An owl is supposed to be blind during the day and a wealthy person without the right kind of intellect cannot see beyond his richness.

Therefore, whenever Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth, travels without Lord Vishnu she makes the person whom she visits metaphorically blind. However, when the Goddess Lakshmi travels with Lord Vishnu, she travels on a Garuda (Eagle) who is the symbol of wisdom.

In a lighter vein the word “Doulat” (wealth) is derived from the words do laat (two kicks)

When wealth comes to a person without right discrimination he gets one kick-this makes him blind, egoist and a bigot. When wealth decides to make its exit It gives the person another kick-that of blood pressure or heart attack!

Krishna is the most worshipped deity as well as the most controversial one. We Hindus believe that Krishna was a true yogi. He did everything in life, but with total detachment. In fact, in the Gita, He states that there is nothing to be renounced in this world, but attachment to the senses and desires. Yet it seems He lived His life to a point of absurdity, marrying 16,108 women, stealing butter while he was a child and bothering and teasing the gopis (ladies) in the village.

However through His pranks, one message comes out clear-Love. His profound Intellect is proven later in the philosophy that He expounds to Arjuna on the battlefield, which Is known as the Bhagavad Gita.

In the Srimad Bhagavat. Krishna freed 16100 women who were Jarasandha’s prisoners. Jarasandha was planning to sacrifice them arid Krishna gave them refuge. During those days women would consider it below, their dignity to live under the protection of a man unless they were married to him. Maybe that is the reason why Lard Krishna had to make them His wives.

Let us not forget that morality differs with time. What may have been perfectly ethical during those days may not be so today: but we have to live according to the rules prevailing during the age that we live in.

The symbolic aspect is that Krishna’s main wives were actually his two hands, two legs, two ears and two eyes. The rest of the 16,100 wives were the veins in His body. This means that just like a wife is supposed to be under the husband’s care and protection so was Sri Krishna the Lord of His sense organs to the extent of even being in control of the blood that flowed within His veins.

Ramayana

The Epic of Ramayana deals with the story of Sri Rama, a king who gives up the throne due to a promise extracted from his father by his stepmother. He goes into exile to the forest for a period of 14 years and his wife and brother follow him there. He kills demons on the way until Ravana, a demon king, abducts Sri Rama's wife. Sita, and holds her prisoner in his palace.

Sri Rama wages a war against Ravana with the help of monkeys and frees his wife. They return to Ayodhya after their exile where they are crowned and reign over Ayodhya (their Kingdom). He later sends his wife Sita into exile to the forest again as his subjects suspected Sita's fidelity and character during her captivity.

Taken literally, the story deals with how a man should conduct himself and fulfill his duty towards his parents, wife, brothers and in this case, since he was a king, toward the subjects of his kingdom. It is also a story of the triumph of good over evil. Symbolically it is something else. Sri Rama denotes true knowledge (Gyan). Sita denotes devotion (Bhakti). In the Ramayana they show how unhappy they are when they are separated. Similarly spiritual knowledge without devotion is incomplete just as devotion is without spiritual knowledge.

Ravana denotes evil and his ten hands are the ten vices that beset humanity. When Sita is taken by Ravana and kept a prisoner in Asoka Vatika, she was very unhappy.

Asoka Vatika or Mayapuri denotes the life of error (Maya), which we lead. So, symbolically, when devotion is corroded by vice, it would lead to the loss of peace of mind.

To restore the happiness that is inherent in devotion, faith (vishwas) would be required and that comes in the form of Hanuman (the Monkey God) who brings Rama's ring to Sita to remind her that Rama is also unhappy without her and would soon come to rescue her.

A war later ensures between the monkeys(sense organs) and Ravana(vices) and Rama (Knowledge) with the help of Hanuman(Vishwas) restores Sita (Bhakti) to her rightful place- that of a queen.

Thus we see that these epics, besides having symbolic value, make very interesting reading. Also they give us a very clear picture of the way of life during that period. It also expounds profound truths, which are true to any age because man essentially is always the same despite a changing environment.

One clear example in the Ramayana is when Sita sees a golden deer and insists that her husband get it for her. Sri Rama realises that the deer cannot bring added happiness to their contented life; if at all it will bring sorrow and so dissuades Sita from her whim.

However, Sita insists and Rama reluctantly leaves her to go after the deer. The deer turns out to be a demon in disguise who tricks even Lakshmana (Rama's brother) to leave Sita alone by shouting, in Rama's voice for help.

Before leaving to help Rama, Lakshmana draws a Line round the cottage and cautions Sita not to step out of the line at any cost. However, when Sita is left alone, Ravana (the demon king), disguising himself as an ascetic, comes to ask for alms to Sita's cottage.

Sita commits the second mistake by stepping out of the line drawn around the cottage by Lakshmana. Ravana assumes his real form and abducts Sita and carries her to his Kingdom.

From this extract from the Ramayana we have two important lessons to learn.

One is that we ought to be content with what we possess. Running after a Golden deer is symbolic of our running after material wealth and power whose true image is actually that of a demon, which ultimately brings about our own ruin and destruction.

The other lesson that we learn is that as long as we do not trespass our limits we are safe. Nothing is harmful as long as it is done within our bounds. The minute we trespass them, the highest power on earth cannot help us.

This is obvious from the facts that in spite of having wanted the deer, if Sita had remained within the line drawn round the cottage, all would have been well. She would not have been carried away by Ravana, and Rama and Lakshmana would have returned safely to the cottage.

From the above I am reminded of a little verse

Gaj dhan, gay dhan, Kaaj dhan
aur ratan dhan khaan
Jab miley santosh dhan
Sab dhan dhool saman.

This means that the greatest of wealth, be it cattle, jewels or kingdoms can never hold a candle to the wealth of contentment.

Mahabharata

The Epic of the Mahabharata deals with the feud between cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It deals with the eternal feud between Good and Evil. All of the characters in the Mahabharata have got symbolic value: and all the situations depicted are true to life. It has been proclaimed centuries ago of the Mahabharata 'what is not in it is nowhere."

Let us take the character of Draupadi. She is supposed to be married to five brothers**.** (The Pandavas - at the same time.)

This on the one hand proves that it was acceptable during those days for a man to take more than one wife. It was also acceptable for a woman to marry more than one man.

On the other hand, however, the above could have a symbolic interpretation. The five husbands represent the five qualities that every woman should possess. Hence.

Yudishtira stood for truth
Bhima for strength
Arjuna for fearlessness
Nakul for Gyan or knowledge
Sahadeva for Bhakti or devotion.

Of course, throughout the Mahabharata, we see these men displaying the qualities attributed to them all the time.

One of the lessons we learn from the Mahabharata is never to be too complacent about our position, be it material or spiritual.

Draupadi was a devout women beloved of her husbands, and a true devotee of Lord Krishna who was their contemporary. After the Pandavas had been cheated by the Kauravas, the later finally consented to give them a small town which, according to the Kauravas, would be of no economic use.

However, the Pandavas, with the help of Lord Krishna prospered and built a palace of veritable joy and pleasure. The description of which would probably put modern mansions to shame.

The Kauravas were invited to the palace where, due to an optical illusion, Duryodhana mistook the reflection of water for a dry carpet and stepped on it thereby getting drenched.

Draupadi, who was watching, could not help laughing and remarking in bad taste "The sons of the blind are bound to be blind." For the above remark she was made to pay dearly. Duryodhana swore revenge and enmity between the Pandavas and Kauravas grew enormously again. The words uttered by Draupadi in a moment of weakness had rankled Duryodhana to such an extant that he tried to disrobe, her in public, and finally the Mahabharata, the greatest of all the wars of ancient India, was fought.

The Great War is also symbolic of the constant conflict that goes on within ourselves between the benign forces and the evil ones.

The Gita

The Gita is a section of the Mahabharata. It is a dialogue between Sri Krishna and Arjuna. In the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna urges Arjuna to fight for his rights and be true to his Dharma. (The nature of a Kshatriya is to fight and that is his Duty). However. Krishna urges Arjuna that he must act for the action alone and not for the fruit of the actions. The fruits of the action have to be surrendered to the Lord in a spirit of Yagna (renunciation).

The Bhagavad-Gita Is India's richest gift to humanity. It talks of life as it was and as it shall always be. Hence its message will always hold true.

Some people claim that refuge in religion is an escapism. The Bhagavad-Gita refutes that theory, as the Gita does not propagate ascetism but courage and valour and to face boldly life's ups and downs.

The Gita also teaches that we must always carry the knowledge that the Ray Divine or Atman, which is present in us, is as much present in the other and that we all are part of a great Cosmic plan which, in its true essence, is Divine.

The Gita rightly exclaims

Soul of Man!
How thou dost seem
Like the water!
From Heaven it Cometh;
To Heaven It ascends.

Chapter 8

The Tulasi

In the earlier chapter. I mentioned the curative powers of the Tulasi (the Basil Plant). Now I would like to explain how to use the Tulasi leaves for our benefit.

There are two types of Tulasi, the black and the white. The black tulasi is known as the Krishna Tulasi and the White tulasi as the Rama Tulasi.

Tulasi is beneficial for various physical disorders. The leaves may be crushed to a fine powder, powdered in a lean vessel (the juice can also be taken), the leaves can be dried under a shade and taken.

Since the leaves are slightly bitter and astringent it may be taken with the help of honey or curd - but never with milk.

It should be taken in the morning followed by breakfast after 30 minutes - normally it is taken once but it may be taken two or three times in acute conditions.

There are no particular restrictions during its treatment. However, very pungent food should be avoided.

1. For malaria fever 5-7 leaves mixed with powdered black pepper maybe taken.
2. 10 grams of Tulasi juice mixed with 10 grams of Ginger juice removes pain in joints.
3. Tulasi seed mixed with Curd or Honey stops vomiting in children.
4. Black Tulasi Juice mixed with powdered black pepper mixed with oil (Ghee) removes gastric troubles.
5. 25 grams of Tulasi juice with 2 grams of black salt if taken 4 days destroys worms.
6. Black Tulasi (5 grams - 25grams) mixed in honey cures Asthmatic complaints.
7. Black Tulasi water mixed with Vinegar (same amount) mixed with butter is beneficial for Eczema conditions.
8. Tulasi leaves heated in water used as drugs cures ear ache.
9. For people suffering from sore throat gargling with 10 grams of Black Tulasi boiled in 1/2 Kg water helps.
10. Black tulasi leaves mixed with 7 almonds and 4 cardamoms (powdered) is good for indigestion.
11. Black Tulasi leaves mixed with honey (same amount) applied to the eyes, cures blurredness.
12. Rub black Tulasi Juice (few drops) on the hands and feet of a person who has fainted.
13. For excessive spit in the mouth black leaves should be chewed.

For daily health one should regularly drink 3 leaves of tulasi Juice mixed with 5 black peppers every morning.

MEHENDI

Mehendi (Henna) is not only a decorative proof that the couple will love one another (when applied to hands and feet)...it has other properties as well.

Mehendi is coolant, deodorant and is used as an astringent as well.

Henna flowers act as a sedative and cure headaches.

The oil of henna is used to prevent grey hair and/or to colour the hair.

Ayurveda physicians use the leaves of henna as to treat white patches on skin.

Fresh leaves, when mixed with lime juice or vinegar is often applied to sore joints.

The above mixture may be applied to give relief to rheumatism...

Back Page

Shakun Narain had her early education in Spain. It was her enquiring mind which led her to go deeper into the whys and the wherefores of Hindu customs and traditions which resulted in her authoring this book "Hindu Customs and Beliefs" and another book "Symbolisms in the Ramayana" also published by the Bhavan.

Shakun is widely traveled and has a keen interest in music. She conducts classes on Hindu philosophy where she instills an awareness of the rich ness of the Hindu heritage in the young minds.

What Others Say

A spirit of enquiry often opens gates to vast expanses of knowledge. While millions follow Hindu customs, beliefs and rituals blindly, Shakun Narain made a diligent study of them and tried to grasp their meaning, purpose and significance.

The volume, though small, is a treasure house of knowledge and wisdom.

- Prof. RAM PANJWANI

"Hindu Customs and Beliefs" is thought-provoking. Shakun Narain has explained in simple and lucid language, scientific roots of ancient beliefs, superstitions, symbolism of deities and educational values of Hindu scriptures.

The book exhorts us to understand ourselves and it reflects the personality of the writer.

-M.R. GEHANI Member, Gujarat Public
Service Commission (Retd.)

I have found this book by Shakun Narain interesting and well balanced. I recommended it to all those who like to know why we do what we do.

- Dr. G. VEE
Senior Economic Consultant